

Bakhtinian's Carnavalesque in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, *Several Perceptions*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*

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ABSTRACT

It is on the tradition of the postmodern and magical realist texts to be in the business of liberating from conventions and established norms and blurring the borders. The way in which these subversive texts challenge the traditionally accepted codes and regulations is directly allied to Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque through which the firmly established hierarchical laws of the society are inverted. The paper convincingly argues how Carter's fiction, an influential paradigm of magical realism, erodes the boundaries of the paradoxical impulses and celebrates the confusion of the categories through incorporating the theories of carnivalisation. It suggests the ways in which carnivalesque operates to open the possibilities to construct a de-hierarchized world which is deprived of privileged sectors, patriarchal authority and any form of supremacy and is filled with the primacy of marginality.

Key words: carnivalesque; patriarchy; subversion; authority; hierarchy

INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, Carter's idiosyncratic writing aims to challenge the cultural preconceptions of the society and to attack the conventional lines of thought. Through development of a utopian coexistence between the subordinate and the dominant factions, she subverts the inequalities and indicates how the boundaries of fixed categories become easily vulnerable: "Her books unshackle us, toppling the status of the pompous, demolishing the temples and commissariats of righteousness. They draw their strength, their vitality, from all that is unrighteous, illegitimate, low" (Cavallaro 2011, p. 5). Calling great attention to the peripheral classes of people, Carter presents them as the figures of authority well-deserved to reside side by side with those traditionally believed to be the dominant group of the society. This is reflected in her childhood home atmosphere which was highly influential in establishing her as a marginal figure. She claims her marginal position at home saying that "I am easily confused by my own roots...and by invisible barriers of class" (Carter 1998, p.19) or "My family history remains, in some ways, inaccessibly foreign" (Carter 1998, p. 14). "Show[ing] little interest in... 'Englishness', tradition, moralism, class loyalty" (Smith 2006, p.336) and hoping to experience a non-European life, Carter migrated to Japan where she could observe Europe from a position of absolute 'otherness'. This strong sense of alienation established her as a marginal writer causing her to radically undermine the Euro centrality and to use the device of the carnivalesque as a means to fulfil her purpose of colliding the disparate elements as well as assaulting the dominancy. Although her entire novels enjoy some touches of the idea of carnivalisation, two of her early novels, *The Magic Toyshop* and *Several Perceptions* as well as her last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* encompass the theme on a much greater scale. What is significant in the novels is not the festivity per se, but is the subversive function of celebration, that is, to produce a chaotic world fraught with incongruities. The following discussion of the novels indicates how Bakhtinian concept of carnivalisation contributes to Carter's purpose of subversion.

FUNDAMENTALS OF CARNIVALESQUE

In the study of the Carnavalesque carried out by a Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival is defined as “a world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, of ceaseless overrunning and excess, where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled” (Bowers 2004, p.67). It is not a spectacle to be acted by some people and seen by the others, but it “embraces all the people” with no “distinction between the actors and spectators” (Bakhtin 1984, p 7): “it has a universal spirit; it is the special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 7). Such a universal essence breaks the distinctions and the barriers suspending “all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” of usual life (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10). Bakhtin (1984 p.411) points to the logic of the “wrong side out” and “bottoms up” and considers this “reversal of the hierarchical levels” an essential element of the carnival.

“...the jester was proclaimed king, a clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the ‘feast of fools’ ... From the wearing of clothes turned inside out and the trousers slipped over the head to the election of mock kings and pops the same topographical logic is put to work: shifting from the top to bottom, casting the high and the old” (Bakhtin 1984, p.81-82).

By incorporating the characteristics of the carnival into literary works, he asserts, literature can become ‘carnivalised’. As the following study of the novels will suggest, the subversive quality of carnival serves as a helpful tool for Carter to carnivalise her writing rather than to polarise the ostensibly warring factions, and brings them under a single umbrella allowing those on the fringes of society, particularly women, to achieve a new central presence.

SUBVERSION OF GENDER HIERARCHIES

One of the substantial functions of the carnivalesque is to mask the “differences between superiors and inferiors” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 246). Since the discussion of ranking brings to mind foremost the issue of gender hierarchies, it is understood that carnivalesque neither cherishes the authority of males, traditionally-believed superiors, nor renounces the power of women who are conventionally accepted as inferiors. Through the channel of the carnivalesque which “liberate(s) from the prevailing view of the world, from conventions and established truths from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (Hegerfeldt 2005, p.133), Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*, fulfils the essential quality of subversion of the gender hierarchies. It begins with victimising the female characters and very unexpectedly culminates with the decline of the masculine authority. In fact, Carter subverts the patriarchy and represents women’s empowerment through tracing a gradual movement from their victimisation to their authority.

The novel delineates the teenage life of a protagonist, Melanie, who misses her parents in a plane crash and has to live the rest of her life with her authoritarian uncle, Philip, his wife, Margaret, and his two brother-in-laws, Finn and Francie. Melanie and Uncle Philip constitute the two very significant poles of this narrative movement in terms of dealing with stereotype femininity and masculinity. As for Uncle Philip, he initially proves to be a fearful and tyrannical figure for his family. When he comes home, Finn warns Melanie to be silent before him and to speak whenever she is asked to: “He likes, you know, silent women” (p.63). Melanie is also warned to change her trousers for a skirt: “Trousers. One of Uncle Philip’s ways. He can’t abide women in trousers. He won’t have a woman in the shop if she’s got trousers on her and sees her. He shouts her out into the street for a harlot” (p.62). Uncle Philip’s dictatorial manner manifests itself mostly at meal times, the only time he spends with

his family. He takes his seat “At the head of the table ... presiding magisterially over the platter of cut bread and the marmalade jar” (p.71-72) helping “himself to the lion’s share of the cake” (p.113). Yet, his wife has “only the tiniest portion of porridge, a Baby Bear portion” since she is “too cowed by his presence even to look at him” (p.73). In Melanie’s childhood, Uncle Philip sends her a very frightening jack-in-the-box which contains “a grotesque caricature of her own face leered from the head that [leap] out at her” (p.12) and foreshadows her further victimisation.

Melanie is depicted to be objectified and disempowered at the very beginning. This objectification manifests itself twice in the narrative, once through Melanie herself and once through Uncle Philip. Melanie’s excessive obsession with marriage and sexual relationship as well as her craving for patriarchal support render her a fully objectified figure suggesting the weakness of the femininity. She imagines her wedding day several times and “gift-wrap[s] herself for a phantom bridegroom” (p.2). Melanie’s thirst for being looked at is to such an extent that she even craves the gaze of the nature: “‘Look at me!’ she said to the apple tree ... ‘Look at me!’ she cried passionately to the pumpkin moon” (p.16). She deprives herself of eating too much food out of the fear that she might “grow fat and nobody would ever love her and she would die virgin” (p.3). The next element of Melanie’s victimisation is the way she is symbolically objectified by Uncle Philip. At the novel’s climax, Uncle Philip attempts to relegate Melanie to the role of an exploited object by forcing her to re-enact the rape of Leda by Zeus in Swan’s disguise. One day before Melanie’s dramatic rape takes place, Uncle Philip plans her actual rape by commanding Finn to play the role of the swan and rehearse with Melanie. However, Finn comes to know of Uncle Philip’s intrigue and escapes from raping Melanie:

He’s pulled our strings as if we were his puppets, and there I was, all ready to touch you up just as he wanted. He told me to rehearse Leda and the swan with you. Somewhere private. Like in your room, he said. Go up and rehearse a rape with Melanie in your bedroom. Christ. He wanted me to do you and he set the scene. Ah. He’s evil!” (Hegerfeldt 2005 p.152).

During the actual play, Melanie confronts a huge toy swan made by Uncle Philip. She begins to run away from it but Uncle Philip moves the strings in such a way that the swan entirely covers Melanie turning her into “a wind-up putting-away doll, clicking through its programmed movements” (p.76). However, the swan on which Uncle Philip has spent too much time in his toyshop to construct, looks terribly ridiculous for Melanie so that she cannot help laughing: “it was a grotesque parody of a swan ... It was dumpy and homely. She nearly laughed again to see its lumbering progress” (p.165).

Melanie’s symbolic rape provokes Finn’s anger causing him to secretly dismember the swan, the symbol of Uncle Philip, and bury it in the graveyard. In doing so, everything goes against Finn trying to resist the denouncement of the patriarchy: “[the spade] to dig a grave for the swan ... kept slipping out of my fingers as if it didn’t want to go with me, and the swan’s neck refused to be chopped up; the axe bounced off it. It kept sticking itself out of my raincoat when I was carrying it” (p.173). However, despite all this resistance, Finn succeeds to repudiate the idea of the dominant patriarchy, once through his refusal to rape Melanie and once through his determined effort to disappear the swan: “You broke up his swan,’ said Francie in awe ... He laughed hugely, rolling in his chair, and cried out again and again: ‘He done it! Finn done it! Good on Finn! Good man!’”(p.184).

Subsequently, in the climactic point of the novel, the whole family celebrates the liberation from the dominant patriarchy. Rising against Uncle Philip who once “suppressed the idea of laughter” (p.124) and banquet, they feast themselves on a “lavish” (p.183) breakfast spending almost the whole day on laughing and dancing:

there was such festivity in the kitchen ... The very bacon bounced and crackled in the pan for joy because Uncle Philip was not there. Toast caught fire and burned with a merry flames and it was not disaster, as he would have made it, but a joke ... Bacon and eggs and mushrooms and tomatoes and fried bread and cold potatoes fried up in bacon fat ... today was a celebration satin ... They took a long time over breakfast and all ate a great deal, even Aunt Margaret ... We'll have a party. We'll have a wake for the swan. With music and dancing ... Then they all washed up together, giggling and splashing water at one another. It was a soap-sud carnival (p.183-85).

Just as much the carnival functions to deprive Uncle Philip of his power, it provides Aunt Margaret with full authority. Margaret who is “struck dumb on her wedding day”, finds her voice again which gives her “strength, [and] a frail but constant courage” (p.197). Initially, Uncle Philip’s rough treatment to Margaret reduces her to the position of a victimised object: “[he] never [talk] to his wife except to bark brusque commands. He [gives] her a necklace that choke[s] her” (p.124). However, eventually she is described as a valiant and happy figure with no “tragic mask” (p.135) on her face: “she [is] beautiful and she smile[s] without strain and her movements [are] assured and sweet, not jerky as a hungry midwinter sparrow under Philip Flower’s stare” (p.183). Aunt Margaret who once was “frail as a pressed flower [and] seemed too cowed in his [Uncle Philip’s] presence even to look at him” (p.73) now courageously commands everyone to rise against him: “But we must stay and finish our business with Philip” (p.197).

Therefore, all the characters, which were initially subordinate to Uncle Philip, take dominant positions and freely do whatever they desire. This represents Bakhtin’s carnival in which “all hierarchies are cancelled” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 251) and life has “the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin 1984, p.7). This is also seen in the ‘renewal of clothes’ which Bakhtin recounts as one of the elements of the carnival, when Margaret feels she does not have to be “in her best clothes” and goes for the “stockings [which are] sieves for holes” (p.183). Melanie too, freely wears her trousers which once were banned by Uncle Philip. Finally, Margaret and Francie who “have always been lovers” (p.194) but did not dare to reveal this “lock together in the most primeval passions” (p.195). Such an incestuous relationship arouses Uncle Philip’s rage causing him to set the entire house on fire. His toyshop along with the entire puppets burst into flames suggesting the end of the patriarchal authority.

This is how the novel culminates in a carnivalesque and subversive manner. Displaying the streets of London in filth and decay, exhibiting Queen Victoria among the debris, undermining Uncle Philip’s power, giving the voice of Margaret (an Irish woman) back and allowing her to speak courageously, all indicate the quality of subversion, particularly that of the British colonisation. The end of the novel is also significant in the sense that the high and the low culture merge: Melanie, who hails from an affluent middle-class family, unites with poor, working-class Finn who smells like a “ferocious, unwashed, animal reek” (p.36) and the couple face “each other in a wild surmise” (p.200).

UNION OF OPPOSITIONS

Another characteristic trait of the carnivalesque is to combine the opposite extremes and to “draw [them] close to each other” (Bakhtin 1984, p.246). It has the tendency to “bring together, unify, wed, and combine the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (Stoddart 2007, p.28). This togetherness of the varied poles which remains a significant point in Bakhtin’s discussion of the carnivalesque, overtly represents itself in Carter’s *Several Perceptions*. Aiming less at denouncing the patriarchy but more at merging the disparate elements, the novel begins with oppositions and ends with a huge celebration party in which the warring factions assemble.

Alison Lee, one of the literary critics of Carter's fiction, appropriately points out that "[in *Several Perceptions*] reality is neither fixed nor certain, and this uncertainty leads to a carnival atmosphere in which anything seems possible" (Lee 1997, p.32). Lee's claim links to Joseph, the protagonist, an indigent old man whose feeling of uncertainty prevents him from distinguishing what/who is right and what/who is wrong. This causes Joseph to maintain several perceptions of himself and of the world around him. In the very beginning, on his way home, Joseph comes across Sunny Bannister, an old friend of him, who claims that once he was a great musician "equal to Kreisler ... and played before crowned heads" (p.13).

However, Joseph is unable to draw a line between the lie and the truth and does not trust in him: "But he lie[s] all the time; it [is] hard to tell where the lies [end] and the truth [begins], or whether or not the press cuttings [belong] to another person and old Sunny [is] not old Sunny at all but only pretending" (p.2). Joseph is not even certain about his own self constructing an "alienated subject" of himself (Gamble 1997, p.58). He believes that his own reflection in the mirror is "some other person and not himself at all, some comparative stranger from whom he [has] rented this secret face out of the Jacobean drama" (p.5). This feeling intensifies when he dreams of different murderers in his own guise. In one of his dreams "the murderer turn[s] his face to Joseph and Joseph realise[s] he [is] looking at his own face. Then he [wakes] up and [breaks] the mirror so it [will] never tell the truth again" (p.3); Thus, he confuses whether "the mirror [was] deceiving him or was he, in fact, dreaming about some other person" (p.5).

Further, due to the feeling of hopelessness, while "contemplat[ing] his grave" (p.18) Joseph lets the coal gas permeate the air and attempts to commit suicide: "he had vague second thoughts; to die of ennui and despair, instead of for some cause" (p.18). Through this attempted suicide, Joseph causes the time to symbolically stand still. The explosion brings about a huge crack in his alarm clock "forever recording the moment the gas ignited, five past five, which would always be the time in this room, now" (p.22). Lorna Sage, Carter's biographer, appropriately considers Joseph as a figure who is "hopelessly disoriented, [and] unstuck in time" (p.16). In fact, it is only "after a magical party [that] he discovers that the past need not be a debilitating influence on the present" making "his peace with time" (Lee 1997, p.19).

Nevertheless, "Joseph's actions are both serious and ridiculous, despairing and funny, social protest and solipsism" (Lee 1997, p.31). After a demented and hopeless Joseph fails to kill himself, he is gradually changed into a somewhat different and jolly character. The suicide he attempts is not the tragic one "but a furious august now done up in comic swathes like the Michelin man" (p.26). Still recuperating from his operation, Joseph is described to be "in a grotesque clown costume of bandages" (p.22) who is "just a practical joker or fool with bells and bladder" (p.26). When he is asked by his psychiatrist to "ramble down Memory Lane" (p.26), he remembers his grandfather who was a professional conjurer: "he could make handkerchief rabbits jump out from his armpit and used to bring alive a whole shadow menagerie on the floral wall of Joseph's bedroom by means of his eloquent hands during lonely sleepless nights or carache in very early childhood, when these performances seemed like real magic" (p.26). Joseph's cheerfulness reaches its peak by the beginning of the new year when he "conceive[s] a bizarre joke" (p.83) and decides to send a piece of faeces to the White House as a Christmas gift: ¹ "[He] sent a piece of excrement to Lynden Johnson ... He printed the words EAT ME on a piece of paper torn off a tea packet and placed it upon the turd. He laughed in a demonic fashion as he went about his task" (p.83). Joseph further attends a huge Christmas Eve party in the large mansion of Kay, another old man living in Joseph's neighbourhood who is the embodiment of carnivalesque. Kay's excessive mirthfulness vis-à-vis Joseph's feeling of distress causes Joseph to initially feel envy and stay away from him. However, in the end, Joseph cheerfully appears in Kay's house and, together

with his friends, celebrates the Christmas party. He is so delighted that without any clear reason he bursts into laughter causing Kay and his female partner, Barbie, to join him in laughter:

He laughed so much he became weak and limp. He laughed so much they caught the infection too although they did not know what the joke was. Kay curled into a ball and giggled hysterically and Barbie laughed like Doris Day, exhibiting perfect teeth; she clasped her slim, brown arms around her smooth, brown knees and laughed and her shoulders shook (p.136).

This way, the melancholy and fact-finding Joseph turns into a comic figure who throws away his book of facts using it “in order to pack it [the shit] up” (p.83). Allowing the time to pass its usual routine, he finally comes into the normal life: “When he woke up it was the violet dawn of another morning” (p.148).

One of the significant thematic elements of the novel is the presence of opposing characters and their ultimate coexistence. For example, Joseph, the depressed protagonist, stands against Beverley Kate (Kay), the jovial figure. Kay is described as “the happiest man alive” (p.35) that constantly appears and vanishes throughout the novel on his silver bicycle “giggling in soft, geisha voices and tinkling the bells of the bicycle” (p.10). The sound of his bicycle is described as “The sweet tintinnabulation” which “shimmer[s] into the golden haze of distance ... like the sound of happiness” (p.11). Although Kay’s face is “quite old and very much creased and wrinkled” (p.142), he always has “a small, thin, gently smiling mouth” (p.141): “Personally, I make a point of smiling at least once every half hour, even if nothing pleasant happens” (p.142). Moreover, Kay’s flamboyant and colourful clothes represent his double cheerfulness:

He wore Levi jeans and jacket ... On his head he wore a khaki forage cap and golden earrings glinted in his ears. The rest of his outfit comprised: a flannel shirt, lacking a collar, probably bought at or stolen from a jumble sale then dyed a cheerful orange in the communal spaghetti saucepan; green round wire-rimmed sunglasses; dirty white plimsolls; and a blue enamel St Christopher medallion round his neck, together with a doorkey on a piece of string and an iron cross. Somehow he gave the appearance of being in costume (p.10).

Apart from personalities, the places where Joseph and Kay live differ to a great extent. Joseph resides in a “decayed district” which is “given over to old people who [have] come down in the world” (p.9) whereas Kay lives in “a great Georgian palace” (p.11) in which exist “two stately tall rooms ... overlooking a shrubby garden and the little lane, and the elegant hall where a languorously curved staircase [rise] up to the monumental first floor drawing-room ... out of Tzarist St Petersburg, suitable for informal dances, soirées musicales and formal receptions” (p.127). Kay keeps the house open “for friends who [come] and [go] like ship that pass in the night” (p.11) and celebrates the New Year. Since the Christmas party “signifies renewal, and an escape (although maybe only a temporary one) from the incoherence of everyday existence” (Gamble 1997, p. 59), the novel lies within the domain of the carnivalesque and Kay, the celebrator, is regarded as a carnivalist figure.

Likewise Kay, Sunny Bannister is a sort of comic and carnivalesque character. He always wears a cap without which “he look[s] only partial, an amputee” (p.12). In the beginning of the novel, his cap is amusingly snatched by a dog causing a small travelling circus to run around: “it [the cap] knocked off his rarely-doffed cap and a huge dog, sprung up from nowhere, seized the cap between its teeth. It ran around and around Sunny in circles, wagging its tail; it has the best of intentions and wanted to organize a game ... and the children went off dancing around them” (p.8-9). In the final episode at the Christmas party, Sunny comically appears in “his outdoor coat and cap in defiance of the fire and [holding] a

fiddle in one hand while, in the other, he [holds] a thick ham sandwich” (p.138). Cheerfully singing and playing a real fiddle given to him as a Christmas gift, Sunny defies the passivity in the elder ages: “Extreme age had returned his face to the spontaneous transparency of childhood; he was sleepy and happy for all to see. He hugged his fiddle to his breast” (p.42).

The next two opposing characters are Anne, Joseph’s neighbour, and Mrs. Boulder, mother of Viv, Joseph’s intimate friend. Anne is described as “a perfectly ordinary young woman” (p.36) whose “left leg [is] stiffed and she limp[s] noticeably” (p.37). She is described as “the quietest of women” that is so reserved and passive that no “sound of radio or a record player [is heard] from her room ... [no] doorbell ringing for her ... Nobody ever visited her ... nor birthday cards nor lumpy parcels” (p.43). Eventually at the Christmas party, the lame Anne is able to walk tall “with a certain grace ... with the proud steps of a racehorse coming into the field ... laughing exultantly” (p.144). In contrast to Anne, Mrs. Boulder is so strong and affluent that Anne wishes her to be her mother: “if I thought my own natural mother was half as rich and beautiful as that tarty friend of yours, I’d be perfectly happy” (p.102). Although Mrs. Boulder is in her forties, “her terrifying naked eyes [have] grown no older, [and are] still thirty years younger than she” (p.48). As opposed to her counterpart who has been “nobody’s dream girl or pin-up” (p.100), Mrs. Boulder is so pompous and beautiful that she is fascinating to a large number of men who go to her house on a daily basis. In the end, the way Mrs. Boulder appears at the Christmas party challenges the old women’s passivity:

Mrs Boulder was wrapped in a white feather boa; her dress was tight white satin, split up one side, her spiked-heeled shoes were silver and a silvery moon dust was puffed over her bouffant meringue of hair and her eyelids were silvered and her face was superb. She was entirely white on white, like a snow drift in moonlight; she was a white queen (p.131).

Hence, the gigantic banquet party the novel ends with, is highly significant in the sense that each and every character puts an end to his/her old life starting new lives. Male/female, young/old, happy/unhappy, affluent/indigent and legitimate/illegitimate delightfully unite together and various miracles take place with regard to each character: Joseph finally adjusts himself to the normal life; Sunny who was engaged all along in “playing an imaginary fiddle” (1), eventually turns to be a real violinist and Anne loses her limp. These are the carnivalised “moments of death and revival, of change and renewal ... [leading] to a festive perception of the world” (Bakhtin 1984, p.9). Pointing to the novel’s theories of the carnivalesque, Lee accordingly claims that “the party suggests renewal as part of a process rather than as an end in itself” (p.34).

SUBVERSION OF GENDER HIERARCHIES AND UNION OF OPPOSITIONS

The early novels play significant role in paving the way for Carter to deal more technically with the theme of carnivalisation in her master novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*. Utilising both forms of the carnivalesque into her later novels, that is, subversion of gender hierarchies and union of oppositions; Carter creates a perfect literary package which comprises the multifaceted forms of carnivalisation.

NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter indicates the denial of the masculine authority by delineating Fevvers, a world-famous aerialist, vis-à-vis Jack Walser, a rational American reporter who is assigned the task of interviewing Fevvers. Fevvers seems to be devoid of any authority at the

outset of the novel being merely the object of the male desires. She spends her youth first in a brothel running by Ma Nelson as a “living statue” (p.39) and then in Madame Schreck’s museum of prodigies as “an object in men’s eyes” (p.39). However, afterwards she succeeds in gaining full control over the most powerful male figures throughout the rest of the novel. Unlike Fevvers who maintains a position of authority, Walser degrades the notion of masculinity being humiliated by her: “no woman ever tried to humiliate him before, to his knowledge, and Fevvers has both tried and succeeded” (p.145). In the sense of profession, educated Walser is represented to have “no special skills to offer” and is eventually “hired cheaply” to make a fool of himself as a clown in a circus. Within the circus arena, Walser, an intellectual human, is depicted to be inferior to the non-intellectual beasts. He is so downgraded that he is made to sit in the chimps’ classroom. While Walser can “make no sense of the diagram chalked on the black board”, the circus chimps appear “to be occupied in transcribing it to their slates” (p.107). Therefore, through a reversal of the traditional gender roles, that is, depicting Walser in the position of object vis-à-vis Fevvers in the position of subject, Carter not only subverts the gender hierarchies but also challenges the rational/irrational dichotomy.

To continue with the business of subversion Carter goes on to downgrade the authority of any superior position in general. In the episode of the *Clown’s Alley*, through degrading Buffo the Great, “the Clown of Clowns” (p.117), from the high to the low position and representing his dynamic and ambivalent status of death and birth she situates him within the trope of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Buffo is a master clown and a great acrobat “who sits by rights not at the head but the magisterial *middle* of the table, in the place where Leonardo seats the Christ” (p.116); however, he is “incapable of coping with the simplest techniques of motion” and when “he tries to open a door, the knob comes off in his hand” (p.116). Being a “centre that does not hold” (p.117), Buffo’s body members are destroyed before the public: “Shake! Shake! Shake! Out his teeth, shake off his nose, shake away his eyeballs, let all go flying off in a convulsive self-dismemberment” (p.117). Finally, having buried Buffo’s body which is assumed to be dead following some rituals, the clowns witness his sudden jump out of the coffin: “Here he is, again, large as life and white and black and red all over! ‘Thunder and lightning, did yuz think I was dead?’ ... Buffo who was dead is now alive again” (p.118).

Merging the oppositions, or to Bakhtin’s word, ‘heteroglot exuberance’, is the next defining feature of the carnivalesque manifested itself further in the significant context of the circus. Associated with the concept of carnival, the circus and the related domain can be regarded as the symbolic to the magical realist world. Hegerfeldt considers circus as “an eminently suitable setting for magic realist fiction” arguing that “the similarities between the circus ... and the world of magic realist fiction are so appealing that the circus has been abused as a real-life substitute for magic realism” (2005 p.130). She further claims that the circus “connect magic realist fiction to the concept of carnival and the carnivalesque” (Hegerfeldt 2005, p. 132). The circus arena in the text undermines the established and physical laws of the nature allowing the opposites to meet and coincide. It is the presentation of “the triumph of man’s will over gravity and over rationality” (p.105), the amalgamation of “the aroma of horse dung and lion piss” with the pleasant fragrance of “French perfume” (p.105) as well as the fusion of humans and non-humans. As to blurring the borderline between the civilised human and the uncivilised animal, as one of the subversive functions of the circus, Cavallaro argues that “In the sphere of the circus, conventional notions of order, hierarchy and stability appear to fall apart, as wild beasts behave like thoroughly encultured humans and humans, in turn, are placed in animalistic roles” (p.143). Such is the case with the ringmaster’s pet pig whose great intelligence has rendered it with extraordinary ability of decision making. In order for the Colonel to decide “whether to hire the young man [Walser]

or no” (p.98) for the circus, out of numerous alphabet cards the pig spells the word ‘C-L-O-W-N’ which is to say Walser, should be employed as a ‘clown’. The pig’s “decision-making skills”, according to Magali’s argument, “not only reinforce the ringmaster’s extraordinary nature but also undermine the conventional division between humans and animals, based on the posited opposition between civilization and nature” (Magali 1996, p.14). This breakdown of the opposition between human and animal is to the extent that Walser remains in a “dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not” (p.110).

Referring to the simultaneous presence of the contrary elements in *Nights at the Circus*, Linden Peach argues the novel celebrates the carnivalesque aspect in the sense that:

there is no single, unified utterance. In its interweaving of different voices—Fevvers, Walser, Lizzie, the capitalist entrepreneur Colonel Kearney and so on—with allusions to Shakespeare, Milton, Poe, Ibsen, Joyce, Foucault ... all express different attitudes and ideologies so that, typical of the carnivalesque, the novel appears to proclaim the relativity of everything (Peach 1997, p. 149).

Peach’s comment on the opposite elements in the novel aptly dovetails with Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival which “permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement ... [and] offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (p.34).

Carter’s attempt to break the conventional norms astonishingly encompasses her attempt to subvert the conventional notion of prostitution. According to Magali (1996) Michael’s assertion “the novel’s presentation of prostitutes in a positive light and of prostitution in non-moral terms, as well as its use of an extraordinary heroine with wings, are all carnivalesque disruptions of established norms” (p.8). The very physical description of the Ma Nelson’s brothel, the “old-fashioned [whore] house” (p.26) per se, indicates its carnivalized nature which defies the Western traditional norms. It is surrounded by an “air of rectitude and propriety ... [it is] a place of privilege ... in which rational desires might be rationally gratified” (p.26). Even the prostitute’s act to burn the house down after Ma Nelson’s death is linked to the Bakhtinian’s carnivalesque. They do so in order to deal with some legitimate professions and to set out to begin again.

The novel ends with Fevvers carnivalesque laughter which hyperbolically begins “to twist and shudder across Siberia” (p.295) and very soon after resonates “across the entire globe” (p.295). Such laughter is a crucial element in the carnival. Since it signifies a sense of rebirth and a new beginning, it is congruent with the Bakhtin’s notion of the ambivalent laughter associated with the “procreating act, with birth, renewal, fertility, abundance ... [and] the future of things to come” (p.95). In a broader sense, all three traits of the medieval laughter Bakhtin recounts, that is, “universalism”, “freedom” and “unofficial truth” (p.90), are appropriate to Fevvers laughter. Thus, according to Magali’s claim, through the ambivalent laughter which indicates Fevvers ability to fool Walser, Carter attempts to undermine the male-domination as well as the accepted established norms (p.21). Magali asserts that the laughter, and the carnivalesque in general, which brings the physical realm side by side with the illusory world tends to be an “ideal strategy for the furthering of subversive feminist aims” (p.21). As a result, pervading with Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, *Nights at the Circus* makes use of the “liminality... to challenge specific targets, either disrupting them from within ... Or ridiculing their pretensions through the laughter” (Hock-soon 2004, p.170).

WISE CHILDREN

Likewise, Carter’s swansong, *Wise Children*, is largely indebted to Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. As for the nature of the carnival in the novel, there is a correspondence

between Carter's use of the carnival and Bakhtin's definition. Bakhtin posits carnival as "essentially opposed to 'official' culture" which is "located on the borderline between art and life" (Sceats 2004, p.179). Carter, in the same fashion, tries to assimilate the popular with the high-brow, thus obscuring the boundaries. Mary Russo discusses the disruption of the high culture created by the carnival in the society which resembles what occurs in the narrative:

the masks and violence of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society. It is as if the carnivalesque body politic has ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation (Russo 1995, p. 218).

The authority of the popular culture is presented through merging the two opposing poles of high-class/low-class dichotomy allowing them to coexist side by side. From the very beginning, this opposition is palpably pointed out when Dora Chance introduces herself and her twin sister, Nora, to be the illegitimate working class daughters of Melchior Hazard, the high-class Shakespearian actor. The twin sisters are on "the wrong side of the track... living on the left-hand side, the side the tourist rarely sees, the *bastard* side of Old Father Thames" (1), while the Hazards live on the legitimate side of the river Thames. However, these legitimate high-class and illegitimate low-class groups are ultimately brought on a common platform. The Hazards, the 'official' branch of the family, eventually confront the Chances, the low-culture branch, and no distinction is made between the two any longer. This is most notably evident at the novel's climax when the hundredth birthdays of Melchior Hazard and his twin brother, Peregrine (Perry), coincide with the seventy-fifth birthday of the twin sisters. In this splendid celebration, a grand scene of reconciliation occurs between the legitimate and the illegitimate, the working class and the upper class, as well as the high culture and the low culture. As a result, Dora and Nora proudly become centralised and publicly recognised as Melchior's daughters. However surprisingly, the sense of pride functions in a twofold manner: they flaunt both their initial marginality and their final centrality. Carter herself claims in an interview by Scott Bradfield that the novel is:

very broadly about class, about our two distinct cultures in Britain. The absolute fissure between bourgeois culture and non-bourgeois culture. The absolute division between people who go to the National Theatre, say, and the sort who frequented the old time music halls. You've got this one class in Britain which pretends to be so proper and respectable, but all the time they're completely repressed. This *other* culture they are trying so hard to distance themselves from—the live sex shows, the louts, the hooligans—is their culture too. They just don't know it yet (91).

Moreover, the twin sisters are depicted with some kind of "excessive liveliness" (Bowers 66), an element of magical realism Bowers claims to contribute, to a remarkable degree, to subvert the patriarchy in the novel, particularly that of the British dominant class:

No one writer attacks the authority of the male British ruling classes and their dominant culture more adeptly than the feminist Angela Carter. Using magical realism as her means of attack, particularly in her novel *Wise Children* ... her characters subvert the authority of the patriarchal upper class by emphasizing to excess the attributes of the female illegitimate working class (65-6).

To portray such liveliness, Carter stands against the patriarchal idea that the elderly women are no longer active indicating how vivaciously seventy-five-year old Dora and Nora dress up for their father's hundredth birthday party:

stockings with little silver stars ... and a couple of little short tight skirts in shiny silver to match,... For women of our age, our legs still aren't half bad. ... Foundation. .. Two

kinds of blusher, one to highlight the Hazards bones, another to give us rosy cheeks. ... Three kinds of eyeshadow-dark blue, light blue blended together on the eyelids with the little finger, then a frosting overall of silver. Then we put on our two coats of mascara. Today, for lipstick, Rubies in the Snow by Revlon. ... I did her nails, she did mine. ... She did my hair, I did hers (p.192).

Unashamedly having profligate sex which causes the house to be on the verge of burning down, performing their naked bodies in the music halls of the suburban London as well as adopting newly-born twins at the age of seventy five is still other examples of the twin's excessive liveliness which disturb the traditional stereotypical views about the aged women.

Apart from overturning gender roles and wedding the seemingly incongruent elements, the seminal factors of the carnivalesque literature, *Wise Children* encompasses other more overt aspects of carnivalisation in its depiction of an exuberant and celebratory figure, Perry. Very aptly embodying Bakhtinian's carnival, Perry, the twins uncle, who is described as "the heart and soul of mirth" (p.92), is associated with conjuring tricks, excessive sexuality and continuous evanescence through which he turns the conventional rules of the nature upside down. As a magician, he summons "a white dove" out of her handkerchief which "[flows] twice round the hall, then perch[s] on top of the antlers on the grandfather clock" (p.31). He attracts the attentions by turning his beloved, Saskia, into a rabbit and magically producing a set of three-month old twins out of his pockets. Uncle Perry further subverts the patriarchal authority through a funny game he plays with his brother, Melchior. He finds the Melchior's crown which has been lost following the fire that breaks out in Melchior's mansion. Since the crown is inherited to Melchior by his ancestors, it has a high significance for him and he spares no efforts to attentively keep it with him. Knowing of this fact, Perry tries to tease Melchior by refusing to give the crown back to him. He fools Melchior making him childishly jump up and down. However, "When Melchior wailed: 'My crown!' again, Perry tossed it to him negligently. He didn't care one way or other about the crown. It was a toy, he was playing a game, Melchior was a fool to take the game so seriously, a fool to clasp the thing as if it were alive, and kiss it. A fool" (p.108). The prestidigitation performed by Uncle Perry is highly significant in the sense that apart from the entertainment aspect, it enables him to handle the most disastrous situations, ease the tensions and rescue people out of the predicaments. It is Perry who satisfies Nora's desire to have offspring by magically producing a twin out of his coat pocket.

The power of his magic is to the extent that enables the film shooting, which once was at the risk of permanent stopping, to be resumed. He finds Tiffany, "the future of the Hazard family" (p.210), who has been lost since quite a long time and reduces the anxiety. It is Perry who finds Melchior's crown and makes him extremely cheerful. These are the reasons why Dora appropriately calls him "better than a conjurer, a genuine magician" (p.71). To continue with his subversive act, centenarian Perry violates the traditional taboo on having a sexual affair in older age. He engages himself with a so overabundant sexual act with Dora that "the agitations of the steel bed [begins] to make the chandelier downstairs directly beneath it, shiver ... [and] the tiers of glass [begin] to sway from side to side" (p.220). Perry explicitly emphasises that such a house-destroying sex is "Not bad for a centenarian. Not bad at all. Not bad. ... Not bad for a centenarian at all, at all" (p.220).

Still another feature that links Perry to the carnivalesque literature is his repeated disappearance. He is an "adventurer, magician, seducer, explorer... rich man, poor man" (p.18) who vanishes very swiftly and turns up miraculously just as "the object of one of those conjuring tricks" (p.19): "whoosh! Out of the window, down the fire escape, a shirt sleeved, carrot topped ten-year-old hurtling helter-skelter down the pavement, sending a hot-dog stand flying, a bootblack sprawling and ... he vanished. Vanished clean away into America" (p.22).

Being “not so much a man, [but] more of the travelling carnival” (p.169), he disappears for decades and returns unexpectedly for his hundredth birthday bringing with him plenty of colourful butterflies: “Thunder and lightning!” sang our Peregrine. ‘Did yez think I was dead?’ ... In on the wind that came with Perry blew dozens and dozens of butterflies, red ones, yellow ones, brown and amber ones” (p.206- 207).

Eventually, the twin’s laughter towards the end, similar to that of the Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*, goes under the destabilising function undermining the pomposity and decency. Having dressed up and put fully their cosmetics on, Dora narrates that “we couldn’t help it, we had to laugh at the spectacle we’d made of ourselves and, fortified by sisterly affection, strutted our stuff boldly into the ballroom” (p.198). The closing of the novel corresponds to Sage’s as well as Bakhtin’s description of the carnival’s end. As to Sage, she claims that: “If carnival represents the promiscuous and horizontal axis of narrative relations, then at carnival’s end we return to verticality the line, the family, history’s determining’s, time’s irreversibility” (p.55). And according to Bakhtin, carnival has a “peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (*a l’envers*), of the ‘turnabout’, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings” (Sceats 2004, p.179).

Therefore, Carter’s last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* which are believed to be “widely recognised as being indebted to ... Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of the carnivalesque” (Bowers 2004, p. 66), make abundant use of the technique as a vehicle to destabilise the existing rules and regulations of the West in general and the feminist ideologies in particular. On the one hand, Carter attempts to overturn the masculine empowerment and the feminine disempowerment situating her later novels in the spirit of carnivalisation. Although the female characters of the early novels are eventually proved to denounce the patriarchy, the subversive heroines of the master novels deal with the repudiation of the patriarchal paradigms to a much greater extent. On the other hand, she destabilises any established norms that undergird the Western culture. Furthermore, via her subversive writing, Carter enables her protagonists to transcend the binary oppositions; in *Nights at the Circus*, existing on the border between a woman and a bird, Fevvers blurs the boundaries between human and non-human; in *Wise Children*, through pomposity and sexual liveliness in their seventies, the twin vaudeville dancers, Dora and Nora Chance, surpass the traditional notion of passivity in the elderly breaking the age borderlines.

CONCLUSION

Hence, via the channel of the carnivalesque which, per se, “refer[s] ... to the idea of subversion” (Hegerfeldt 2005, p. 133), Carter, as Sceats maintains, “seeks to subvert received truths and conventional thinking on many levels and in diverse areas” (2004 p.143). Sceats relates these many areas to “gender relations and their intersection with class” (2004 p.143). Indeed, Carter’s own isolation and alienation from the dominant centre of the society discussed earlier is probably a sufficient reason for her to use carnivalesque as a device to challenge the conventions of the society that evaluates human beings in terms of gender and racial values. As the aforementioned study proves, she breaks any demarcation line traditionally drawn between masculinity and femininity considering women as highly capable figures who are able to defy their exploitation and stand in male position. Her female characters are delineated to have been endowed with extraordinary powers to rise against oppression and fight for their inevitable equality causing the defiance of the conventional gender hierarchies and the denouncement of the patriarchy. Apart from Carter’s assiduous concern with male/female dichotomy and depicting women as the same or even better source

of power as men, she pays immense attention to the marginal class of people who, by some means, are treated with contempt. Ending her novels with jovial and exuberant assembling, she depicts different classes of characters who gather together and start new beginnings “with reconciliation and renewal” (Gamble 1997, p. 57) through celebrating huge social gatherings. Finally, the emphasis of the carnivalesque upon togetherness and equality rather on gender hierarchy and social difference is the fundamental quality contemporary literature and any modern society seeks to obtain.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bakhtin’s association of the image of excrement with the ‘regeneration and renewal’ (p.175) is also pertinent to Joseph’s status of reviving personality.

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